

# Punctuating with capital letters

One of the most common errors in essay writing is the misuse of capital letters (upper case letters). Students tend to use capital letters for everything that feels important to them. Excessive capitalisation is distracting and confusing for the reader, and is often just incorrect punctuation. On the other hand, lack of necessary capitalisation can appear disrespectful (e.g. The British and Irish English influenced aboriginal [Aboriginal] English). Also, capitalisation should *not* be used for emphasis in your formal academic writing (use underlining or italics for that). The main rules for using capitals are:

1. capitalise the first word in a sentence
2. capitalise proper nouns
3. use maximal or minimal capitalisation for titles & headings



GRAMMAR CHECKERS will flag omission of capital letters for the beginning of sentences and for some more common names (e.g. 'suzie' but, is unable to tell you that 'prudence' is a word as well as a name). They will not flag unnecessary capitalisation (e.g. The X Road to Happiness X is healthy living). It is best to learn the rules of correct capitalisation and carefully proofread your essays.

## 1. Capitalise the first word of a sentence

The first word after a full stop is capitalised. Also, the first word of a direct quotation is capitalised, if the quotation is a complete sentence.

### Examples

- ✓ Interstellar space travel will not be seen by this generation. This is too far into the future.  
(THE FIRST WORD AFTER A FULL-STOP IS CAPITALISED.)
- ✓ Jean-Paul Sartre penned the immortal words: 'Hell is other people'. (QUOTE IS A COMPLETE SENTENCE.)
- ✓ The news commentator described the protesters as 'thugs'. (QUOTE IS NOT A COMPLETE SENTENCE.)

## 2. Capitalise proper nouns

- ❖ **Rule 1:** Capitalise all *personal names* (real or fictitious, nickname or substitute for a name, animal or thing). Also, capitalise people's *official or religious titles* along with their names **BUT** use lower case for the generic name (e.g. Everyone has a favourite aunt or uncle.). Always capitalise *the personal pronoun* 'I'.

### Examples

- ✓ After the American elections, I watched President Oabama's speech with Dad.
- ✓ I invited Uncle Bob to meet my husband. My mother came too
- ✓ Louis XVI was King of France and was the only French king to be executed.
- ✓ Three prime ministers attended the conference, including Prime Minister Pitt.
- ❖ **Rule 2:** Capitals are used for calendar items, such as days of the week, months of the year and special days. They are **NOT** used for seasons.

### Examples

- ✓ In Australia, December is in the summer so it does not snow at Christmas.
- ✓ I hope New Years Day falls on Friday this year.
- ✓ My friend is training for the Winter Olympics. She will train through summer and autumn.

- ❖ **Rule 3:** Capitals are used for geographical names but **NOT** for directions unless part of a distinctive region.

### Examples

- ✓ My sister lives in Brisbane which is in on the east coast of southern Queensland.
- ✓ The students were mostly from South East Asia and the Middle East.

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- ❖ **Rule 4:** Capitals are used for nationality, ethnic groups and religions. The words, *indigenous and aboriginal* are not capitalised when they mean 'native to'; however, you must capitalise these words when referring to Indigenous peoples.

#### Examples

- ✓ The term 'Indigenous Australians' includes Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders.
- ✓ Colonialism resulted in the impoverishment of indigenous people all over the globe.
- ✓ The non-Christian religions in Australia include Judaism, Buddhism and Islam.
- ❖ **Rule 5:** The names of disciplines are **NOT** capitalised unless it is a language or a course name is followed by a number.

#### Examples

- ✓ I study education, sociology, history, French and Latin. (LANGUAGE)
- ✓ Those who take Sociology 101 will be tested this Friday. (COURSE NAME)
- ✓ I taught a composite Kindergarten and Year 1 class for my practicum. Luckily, they were all Stage 1. (SPECIFIC TITLES)
- ❖ **Rule 6:** Capitals are used for distinctive historical periods.

#### Examples

- ✓ Many children worked in the coal mines during the Industrial Revolution.
- ✓ The story of Robin Hood originates in Medieval England.
- ❖ **Rule 7:** The sun, moon and earth are **NOT** capitalised **UNLESS** the word is used in an astronomical context. All planets and stars are proper nouns and start with capital letters.

#### Examples

- ✓ The planet Earth orbits the Sun, and the Moon orbits the Earth.
- ✓ Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun.
- ✓ The largest moons of Jupiter are Io, Europa, Ganymede and Callisto.
- ❖ **Rule 8:** The names of *institutions* and *government departments* are proper nouns and require capitalisation. If the title starts with *the*, it typically starts with lower case. Generic words for institutions do not require capitalisation.

#### Examples

- ✓ The University of New England is a five-star university for student experience.
- ✓ Tom was born in the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney in the summer of 1978.
- ✓ The Labor Party promised more funding to hospitals, schools and universities.

## 3. Use maximal & minimal capitalisation for titles & headings

There are two main capitalisation practices for titles and headings (e.g. the name of a book, Internet site, academic article, a play, a poem, a film, a magazine, a piece of music, headings in an assignment essay and a report):

**1. Maximal capitalisation (headline style):** a capital letter is used for the *first word* and *every significant word* (i.e. words such as *a, the, of, an, or, in* are not capitalised) e.g. The Silence of the Lambs; Capital Cities of Australia and New Zealand and their Population.

**2. Minimal capitalisation (sentence style):** only the *first word* and *proper nouns* are capitalised e.g. The silence of the lambs; Capital cities of Australia and New Zealand and their population.

In modern writing, there is a tendency to prefer simpler text styles, so minimal capitalisation is most acceptable; however, you can choose either practice in most writing situations so long as you **ARE CONSISTENT** (i.e. no chopping and changing!).